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AUTHOR Witzel, Anne
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ABSTRACT

The largest group of non-English speaking immigrants who come to Canada are Italians, the vast majority of whom are from Southern Italy. This paper furnishes information on their cultural background and lists multi-media resources to introduce teachers to Italian society so that educators may better understand their students. Immigrant children are faced with choosing between two conflicting life styles -- the values of Canadian society and family values and customs. When teachers are aware of the problem they can cushion the culture shock for students and guide them through a transitional period. The paper deals with history, geography, and climate, explaining and suggesting some ideas on why Southern Italy differs from Northern and Central Italy. Cultural differences can be traced not only to the above factors, but also to ethnic roots and the "culture of poverty" -- attitudes of the poor which create a mentality that perpetuates living at a subsistence level. The low status of women as it affects society is discussed, since the family is seen as a society in microcosm. The last portion of the paper presents primary sources, annotated bibliographies, and audio-visual materials. A related document is SO 004 351. (Author/SJM)

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ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND ITALY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MULTI-MEDIA PACKAGE ON ITALY

Includes an Annotated List of Contents of the Package

Anne Witzel

May, 1969

FOREWORD

The multi-media packages on the ethnic groups in Toronto are an attempt to introduce Toronto teachers, especially teachers of English as a second language, to some of the cultures and societies from which their students come. It is now widely accepted that to learn and use a second language requires a thorough awareness and understanding of the society in which that language is spoken. Conversely, a knowledge of other societies and cultures on the part of teachers may help bridge gaps in understanding and facilitate the students' mastery of English.

The following paper is an introduction to the multi-media package on Italy. In the extensive reading and studying done on Italy for this project certain themes and issues emerged. These themes and issues became the criteria for the selection of materials in the package and for the emphasis of the paper. The multi-media package gives only a sample of Italian culture; the following pages of text are limited to provide a few reference points to encourage a further exploration of Italian culture, history and society. The materials in the package and in the bibliographies all contributed to the content of this paper, although the listed primary sources were most significant.

ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND ITALY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MULTI-MEDIA PACKAGE ON ITALY

ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND ITALY

Italians are the largest group of non-English speaking immigrants who come to Canada (in 1967, 30,055). There are no accurate figures on the size of the Italian community in Toronto; an informed estimate, however, is about 270,000. The vast majority of these immigrants come from the poverty stricken south of Italy, that is, the area south of Rome, including the island of Sicily.[1] Until recently, and still to some extent, emigration from these parts was the only effective way Italians had found of dealing with the poverty of Southern Italy. Obviously, it was a real solution only for those who left. Without land reform, irrigation, education and industrial development as well as new ways of thinking, the peasants of Southern Italy continued to live in abject poverty. Since the end of the Second World War, money has been poured into Southern Italy by the government and some of these changes have been accomplished, although more slowly and less completely than was originally envisioned by the government. There are therefore many Italians who are impatient with the slowness of the progress being made at home and they move to the industrialized north of Italy or to other countries in Western Europe and North and South America. In order to reach an understanding of Italian immigrants in Toronto, it is useful to take a look at Italian society and history, particularly the society and history of Southern Italy.

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1 There are a number of districts in Southern Italy, some of which are better off than others. Sicily is the poorest and least developed. What is outlined on the following pages is generally typical of most of Southern Italy and especially of Sicily.

SOUTHERN ITALY

History, Geography and Climate

Since 1870 when Italy was united and became a nation, one of the biggest problems for the government has been the problem of the South. The Italian word for the South is the "Mezzogiorno" or "the middle of the day" which refers to the heat of the sun burning down relentlessly on Southern Italy, drying up the already exhausted land.

Southern Italy is quite different from Northern and Central Italy: it is much poorer in natural resources now, although in the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, it was rich and fertile; the climate is more extreme; and the history of the South has been different from the rest of Italy. Whether or not these differences account for the different "mentalities" of the North and South is open to question. The Southerner is less practical than the Northerner; he is more concerned with power than with money; he is more satisfied with gestures than with deeds. The "Mezzogiorno" has puzzled and continues to puzzle the government and everyone who tries to raise the standard of living in Southern Italy. Most sociologists and governmental experts agree that the problem is not explained merely by geography, climate and history.

Nevertheless the experiences of Southern Italy have operated to keep it very much a Mediterranean country influenced mainly by Greece, Africa and Spain, while Central and Northern Italy have been far more influenced by northern continental Europe. Such different historical influences must have made for differences in the development of the people of the "two Italies."

Ethnically, the two groups have different roots. North and Central Italy were settled by Teutons, Gauls, Etruscans and Asians. The South was settled by ancient Greeks and Carthaginians. Southern Italy, like the North,

was part of the Roman Empire, but at that time was a flourishing centre of Greek culture, rather than Roman. After the fall of Rome, Southern Italy was deeply influenced by Moslem culture; Moslems actually occupied Sicily for several centuries and their influence reached to the gates of Rome. Meanwhile North and Central Italy were influenced by the Church and the Holy Roman Empire of Northern Europe. After the Moslems were expelled from Sicily by the Norse, Southern Italy was at different times under French, Spanish or Austrian control until unification, completed in 1870. These monarchies had some effect upon the rest of Italy, occupying various duchies in the North from time to time, but the effect was not so profound as upon Southern Italy where their rule was longer and tighter. Many of the city-states of Northern Italy early became independent of any foreign power. In the fifteenth century these city-states flourished brilliantly, though briefly, and left the world a magnificent heritage, known as the Renaissance. The Renaissance, however, almost completely bypassed Southern Italy which remained feudal and had no large cities except Naples, a seaport. Naples was the centre of culture for Southern Italy and one of the centres for the rest of Italy. Its great achievements, largely because of the university there, were mostly in literature and philosophy rather than in the visual arts. The intellectual life of Naples flourished until unification when it was replaced by Rome, which became the capital city of all Italy.

Society: A Culture of Poverty

Why has progress been so slow in Southern Italy, despite the efforts and money expended since the Second World War? Part of the answer seems to lie in a fairly new analysis of poverty: sociologists call it the culture of poverty. The culture of poverty is not confined to Southern Italy, but is

present wherever generations of people have lived at a subsistence level. It exists in Asia, in South America, in the West Indies, in the United States, in Canada and indeed in all pockets of poverty around the world. Poverty creates a mentality which its victims use as a defence against total despair. Some characteristics of this mentality are a resignation to and an acceptance of whatever injustices or misery life inflicts; an apathy and conservatism which resists any change in the social, economic or political structure; a distrust of anyone outside the family which makes a united social protest virtually impossible; a rather hedonistic approach to life which is understandable but which prevents any kind of long-range planning for the future. Attitudes such as these have been barriers to social change around the world and Southern Italy is no exception. All the money a government is willing to spend and all the efforts of well-meaning people outside the culture of poverty have been to no avail until the attitudes of the poor themselves have changed.

Attitudes don't change quickly, not in a year or two or three; even totalitarian states have difficulty changing attitudes. Danilo Dolci, an architect from Northern Italy, has spent most of his adult years, since the early nineteen-fifties, in Sicily trying to help the poor of Sicily help themselves. In comparison with the time and effort he has put in he has done very little. That he has accomplished anything at all is a tribute to his dedication, his patience, his understanding and most of all his respect for the people he is working for.

The peasants of Southern Italy believe there is no alternative to their misery; thus they seem to be their own greatest enemy when alternatives are introduced. Yet it is understandable that they believe this. The union of the Italian states did not improve their lot; the only change was higher taxes. The era of Mussolini's Fascism had one specious advantage for them: mothers were paid an allowance for each child they bore. But nothing was done to solve the chronic unemployment and underdevelopment of the

South. The family allowance, in fact, increased problems in the long run by encouraging the already existing over-population, although Southern Italian women have always been prolific child-bearers, like most women trapped in the culture of poverty.

The poor of Southern Italy distrust any innovation to improve their lot whether it is medical treatment or education. They prefer to live as they have always lived until someone who is willing to make a super-human effort, like Danilo Dolci, persuades them otherwise. Natural and human resources are wasted and to the outsider the tragic waste seems unnecessary. If only literacy were enforced; if only the land were irrigated; if only dams were built; if only women were accorded human value. How easy it sounds and how difficult it seems to implement. It is as if they are happier with the known, however evil, than they can ever imagine being with the unknown, however good. They live in a frightening world of superstition: of love potions, death potions and their antidotes; of the evil eye and the spell which will destroy its effect; of good and evil spirits in the home and in the woods. When misfortunes occur malevolent spirits are blamed rather than rational factors such as the greed or injustice of their fellow-man. In some parts of Sicily, the Mafia exploits this fear and apathy which has been bred into the poor. Furthermore, D. Dolci shows that the Church and the local governments co-operate with the Mafia or at least resist attempts to change the lives of the poor. On the whole, religion truly acts as "the opium of the people."

Since the family is society in microcosm, it is useful to examine the family life of Southern Italy's poor. The status of women is typical of most peasant societies. A woman's sole function after marriage is to bear and rear children. Her single most valuable attribute before

marriage is virginity. The concept of a wife is not as a life's companion or the object of a man's love; but rather as a housekeeper and mother. Often marriages are arranged; thus the ideal of a love relationship is understandably foreign to Southern Italians. What we consider the rewards of a male-female relationship are almost completely lacking. There are no couples, as North Americans understand the term, who plan and live many aspects of their lives together. In Southern Italy, the father lives his life, the mother lives hers. They come together for the most elemental of purposes -- to create a family.

As marriage, motherhood and a large family is almost the only road to status for women, it is understandable that they have many children. Fernandez in The Mother Sea (1967) is bitter about the negative implications of the male and female roles.

> "How can the South ever attain a new awareness and integrate itself into modern life while maintaining women in the ancient state of subordination and inferiority? ...the Southernists, absorbed in their denunciation of the exploitation of the peasants by the State, completely gloss over...the exploitation of women by men, as if woman was a naturally inferior being whose only aim should be to serve her master well.
>
> ...to explain the failure of the intellectual middle classes, the Southernists invoke the climate, the Spaniards, the Bourbons, the United State (again), but never the main reason, the evil of all Italian evils: that abominable upbringing that ruins the boys from childhood onwards.
>
> ...There is nothing astonishing in their [the girls] not bothering to develop their minds or affirm their personalities. They know that their most precious quality does not really belong to them, that their husband will take it away in one stroke and that afterwards they will be worthless. ...Half of the population is in this way prevented from exercising the slightest influence on the intellectual and moral evolution of the South.
>
> As for the boys, things are hardly better."
>
> (Fernandez, 1967, pp. 52 - 53)

As it is considered a misfortune to be a woman or to give birth to girl children, sons are spoiled by both their mothers and fathers and daughters grow up with little sense of their own worth; to survive they follow in their mothers' footsteps. Fathers tend to assume little responsibility for the training of their children, as they themselves were spoiled by their mothers; they are rather distant kings of the household, who may occasionally provide an erratic, frightening kind of discipline. Boys grow up extremely attached to their mothers, who unfortunately have little to offer their sons in the way of training for life since they have not been encouraged to develop their own potential. Thus both male and female suffer in a society where women do not have equal value as human beings. And the society suffers because it wastes so much of its human resources.

The change has started; however, the poor are beginning to protest. Many Southern Italians are now members of the Communist party, which exerts pressure on the Christian Democratic government to make more and faster changes. Many farmers have been persuaded to use fertilizer and irrigation and to move from the slums into new cottages. At first they continued to live in their hovels and to use the new cottages to store their tools. Workers who go to Northern Italy and other parts of Europe often return home bringing back with them new ideas about the rights of the poor and the methods of gaining those rights.

A few years ago a young Sicilian girl refused to marry the man who had kidnapped her (still a quite acceptable way in Sicily to force marriage on an unwilling family or a reluctant girl). Her refusal shocked Sicilian society: she had lost her "honour" and therefore no man would marry her. The immensity of her action is obvious, given the status of women outlined above. Recently she further shocked the society by in fact marrying.

Many young girls are now teaching school, which suggests a change in attitudes towards women (and fewer and fewer marriages are arranged). Still change comes slowly and there is still a long way to go.

Culture-Shock Versus Adjustment

It is extremely important to point out that for some reason Italian immigrants from the South do not join the culture of poverty in the land they emigrate to, at least they do not in Toronto. They are upwardly mobile. Their qualities of endurance are put to good use. They scrimp and save until by the second generation, if not sooner, they have joined the middle class. No one knows whether this mobility is due to the new environment or whether those who emigrate are different from those who remain at home. Probably it is a combination of the two. The fact remains, however, that a large proportion of Italian immigrants in Toronto come from the society outlined above. It must be a frightening, and only sometimes, an exhilarating experience when they find themselves suddenly transported from the peasant environment of Southern Italy to the urban environment of Toronto, where customs and values are so entirely different.

At what sacrifice the Italian in Toronto adjusts can barely be imagined. Naturally, he must maintain many of his old customs and values in order to preserve his sense of identity and probably to prevent a complete psychic breakdown. Those who suffer most from the culture-shock are the children of the Italian immigrants, who are torn between the values of Canadian society to which they are exposed every day in school and the values of their parents, with which they are raised. And it is difficult to imagine two more conflicting life-styles. Perhaps an understanding of the conflict on the part of teachers will help to cushion the culture-shock for the children. The multi-media package on Italy is an attempt to make some aspects of Italian society easily available to teachers.

PRIMARY SOURCES USED IN THE
PREPARATION OF "ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS AND ITALY"

Barzini, L. The Italians. New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1964.

Dolci, D Poverty in Sicily. London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1959.

Fernandez, D. The Mother Sea: Travels in South Italy, Sardinia and Sicily. London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd., 1967.

Levi, C. Christ Stopped at Eboli. New York: Noonday Press, 1963.

Steel, R. (editor). Italy. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1963.

THE CONTENTS OF THE MULTI-MEDIA PACKAGE ON ITALY

Written Material*

1. Bibliographies

A critical bibliography has been prepared on many aspects of Italy from Roman times to the present.

A film bibliography and a bibliography of other audio-visual aids have also been organized with information about rental, ease of availability and when possible a critical estimate of the films etc. involved.

2. Books

The Italians by Luigi Barzini

The paradoxes of Italian history and the contradictions of the Italian temperament are vividly presented in The Italians. The author, himself an Italian, sees the Italian people as a self-destructive people. When first published, the book stirred up a great deal of controversy and resentment among Italians.

Bread and Wine by Ignazio Silone

The author, formerly a Marxist, very movingly deals with the problem of social justice within the specific framework of a poor Italian village. The central character is a Christ figure and a Communist disguised as a priest. The book was first written while the author was still a Communist but it was revised after his disillusionment.

Christ Stopped at Eboli by Carlo Levi

During the thirties Carlo Levi was exiled to a village in Southern Italy because of his opposition to Mussolini. The author portrays the poverty and deprivation of the people of the village

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* Bibliographic references for this material are listed in the Critical Bibliography of Materials on Italy.

with love and compassion. Despite their ignorance and superstition, the reader feels a deep respect for their endurance and courage in the face of hopeless adversity.

The Leopard by Giuseppe di Lampedusa

This historical novel opens at the time when Garibaldi and his red shirts invade Sicily as their contribution to the unification of Italy (c. 1859). The central characters are a noble family of Sicily who are losing both their wealth and their power. The central message of the book is that it is impossible to change the mentality of Sicilians, either peasant or aristocratic, and that they all are resigned to the poverty, squalor and waste of their island. One is reminded of recent twentieth century analyses of the South of the United States.

Two Women by Alberto Moravia

Two Women is an engrossing novel (now a movie) about a mother and her daughter who survive the Second World War in Italy by sheer animal endurance. The author has written a condemnation of war in general and portrayed a horrifying picture of the Second World War in Italy in particular.

The Mother Sea: Travels in South Italy, Sardinia and Sicily by Dominique Fernandez

The author and his wife spend a great deal of time in Southern Italy, although they are French. The Mother Sea is a subjective, impressionistic record of one of their journeys. Much of what the author observes and comments upon is backed up by more scholarly and objective works. One of the most interesting aspects of the book is the author's critique of Southern Italian sexuality.

The Italian Cookbook by The Culinary Arts Institute (Chicago)

Recipes for well-known Italian dishes and for many lesser-known Italian dishes are given in this book. In addition, there are interesting notes on special feast days and other aspects of Italian culture.

Renaissance Painting by Franco Russoli

Many of the most beautiful paintings of the Renaissance are reproduced in colour.

The Renaissance by Roberta Paine

This small pamphlet reproduces some of the famous works of both the Italian Renaissance and the Northern Renaissance. The text briefly but lucidly explains some of the major developments of the Renaissance.

Audio-Visual Material

Prints

From the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum twelve black and white photographs have been obtained. Six photographs are of Roman objets d'art and six of Renaissance pieces.

From the Ontario Art Gallery a set of post cards in colour of the Renaissance has been obtained.

Filmstrips

Italian Children is a black and white filmstrip with subtitles. Life and customs of a farming family near Assisi in Northern Italy are presented. The filmstrip is geared to the primary age group but is informative and suitable for all age groups. (A parallel film is available from the Teaching Aids Department of the Board of Education for the City of Toronto.)

Italy: The Changing South is a filmstrip in colour with script. It deals with the recent economic improvements in Southern Italy. It is also enlightening in that it shows the tremendous difference in standards of living between the North and South.

From "The Nations of Today", an excellent series dealing with many aspects of a number of countries, a filmstrip on the history of Italy has been obtained.

Tape

A tape of Italian music, mostly folk music, has been put on a cassette to provide a further insight into the richness of Italian culture.

Various other sundries have been included.